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Malay Society in the late Nineteenth Century: The Beginnings of Change.
By J.M. Gullick. Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1987.

The book by J.M. Gullick is significant in more ways than one. It offers a good panoramic view of Malay society at the end of the nineteenth century, a point of time greatly significant in itself. As aptly titled, it is the “the beginnings of change” in a massive way. It was from this time that Malay society was widely exposed to European influence, and it began to affect the society as a whole. Gullick’s account, collated mainly from contemporary sources, show how certain sections of the society were already responding to the new situation. As admitted by the author, the change had actually begun much earlier with the English colonization of Penang and Singapore and the take-over of Malacca from the Dutch, but he is right in maintaining that the “. . . change towards the pattern of the twentieth century began to make way, hesitantly at first, about 1820” (p.2). Social change is a continuing process, either stimulated by contact with the outside world, or effected from within through inventions and rearrangement of known patterns. That is why scholars usually refer to socio-cultural change occurring all over the world at about this time as “modernization”.

Gullick does not deal with change *per se*, but he provides the baseline picture of the society on the threshold of that change and what happened when new and foreign elements (this time the British colonial government) began to intrude into the society. And that picture is a result of collating a vast amount of literature contemporary to the period, as the European form of administration began to take hold of the indigenous polity. However, the material was mainly from “European” and “official” sources, that is, the reports and records of the European travellers and civil servants serving the various Malay states at the time. In short, with the exception of translated works such as *Hikayat Pelayaran Abdullah*, the data are mainly observations from outside the culture. One may argue that such observation

is filtered through the eyes of a foreign culture, and moreover, the travellers and officials of the nineteenth century were not trained observers of society like the ethnographers of today, but no one can deny that what they had observed and recorded are useful material for us to have a glimpse at Malay life then. In other words, the ethnographic value and quality of the data are not diminished by the “foreignness” of the observers. The present work by Gullick is, therefore, useful to help us understand Malay society of the period.

Gullick also uses recent studies by local scholars such as Shahril Talib, Sharom Ahmat, Khasnor Johan and Khoo Kay Kim and, therefore, benefits from the Malay materials used in those studies. It is doubtful if an extensive use of materials in Malay like the Malay newspapers which had made their appearances in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, or the documents of the Unfederated Malay States which were in Jawi, or the “creative-but-factual” literature like the contemporary Malay *syair* (see the Appendix of Yusuf Hashim’s *Persejarahan Melayu Nusantara*; examples of such *syair* are *Syair Tuan Humphreys* and *Syair Sultan Sulaiman Badrul Alam Shah*) would produce a drastically different picture. In fact, the 14 sections of the book give almost a complete “ethnographic” coverage of the society. Since the picture is drawn mostly from observation from the outside, it is naturally devoid of the “world-view” from within, that is, the view of those undergoing the social change itself, although it is not left out entirely as we see it manifested in various ways. For example: “Plainly this was not a house built to a Malay design, yet there was a certain unease; when the same man ‘unsurped certain royal privileges of prerogatives on the occasion of his daughter’s wedding’ and died suddenly, there was a general belief that supernatural sanctions had struck him down” (p. 184). The continuity and change is clearly illustrated here.

The institution of the ruler was the hub of Malay life in the past, and today it remains very much so even if it takes a different form, as the recent “constitutional crisis” in Malaysian politics would indicate. Gullick, in his first two chapters, deals with the ruler, showing how the new regime affected the institution. Thus, the ruler might take up a Western way of life, but invariably he remained true to his traditions and religion. As Gullick says, “It was not the technical novelties which impressed him”, but the military parade. It is a succinct observation, especially in making the point that “the European style” of doing things was different from what the ruler was used to. The past was the world of glorious and pompous display of the ruler’s position held at the open *balai*, but the new style of government was confined to the business-like council halls that the ruler had to learn to adapt to.

Perhaps what is required here is an explanation as to why the Malay

courts in the past had to rely heavily on pomp and elaborate ceremonials. Was it because the legitimacy of the ruler was entirely dependent on beliefs and traditions? In such a culture, the myth that nourishes that belief and tradition had to be made highly visible, and this can only be done by staging rituals and ceremonies. With the advent of modern government based on written law and constitution, there is no more need for elaborate ritual, but a society cannot get rid of the natural inclinations of its people to resort to symbolic behaviour whenever the need arises. The Malay ruler might have to get used to the "European style", but the plumed hat, the golden braid and the flashy epaulettes which adorned his new-style uniform did not make him abandon his *tongkolok*, *baju songket* or *samping*, as his forebears had worn on their installation as rulers.

The picture drawn of how Malay society absorbed the changes that were taking place all around it is, therefore, vivid enough and ethnographically very useful. This goes for the rest of the book, and it covers almost every aspect of Malay life adapting itself to the changing situation. The transformation of the "ruling class (*orang bergelar*) who "recovered (their) status even if they had suffered a loss of power" (p. 364) and how they jealously guarded that status against the *rakyat* and the newcomers from other parts of the archipelago make interesting reading. The workings of the Malay village economy and the relationship with the wider economic environment at the time and how such systems fared in the face of the encroaching colonial economic pattern make the reader wonder if the non-economic factors that account for the retardation of Malay economic progress at mid-twentieth century, which was so much debated by economists and non-economists alike, had not had their beginnings in the late nineteenth century. The style of living, judging from Gullick's account, was little changed at the end of the nineteenth century, but in a short time, in new areas, the process of urbanization created an urban style of living. At the end of the nineteenth century, bureaucratization of Islamic affairs was already being felt, and by mid-twentieth century, Islam had become the only identifying feature of the sovereignty of the Malay state, where the Sultan's position as head of religion was in fact being strengthened and entrenched.

However, the most pertinent question is why Malay society has not disintegrated in the face of change. Much of the answer can be found in Gullick's book and in the title of his last chapter, "The stability of Malay society". Gullick attributes this "stability" to the British policy of "non-intervention in 'Malay religion and custom'" (p. 363). Another reason given is the slow speed of the change itself, which allowed for Malay values and psychological dispositions to adjust to the new situations. Particularly significant is Gullick's observation that certain situations might induce "a

sense of shame (*malu*) or resentment (*sakit hati*)", which would lead to "an initial calm", but would ultimately end in *amuk* or "disorientation" (*latah*). Very recent events seem to bear this out: the Malays when confronted by a blatant challenge to their status as the indigenous people of Malaysia, had almost gone *amuk*, if the tense situation had not been diffused in time by the government.

Gullick is probably right in attributing the ability of the Malay society to adjust to change to the fact that there was no drastic upheaval in its structure. The traditional leadership still held sway even as new elements (traders and newcomers) emerged. Even today when life is dominated by a new factor, politics, the leadership is still in the hands of the traditional ruling class, albeit in a different garb. The main strength lies in the ability to retain the society's identity, in which religion and *adat* play a dominant role. Although Gullick's book is essentially "ethnographic", it is a useful work as it has been able to marshall and collate scattered data so as to give a picture of a society undergoing change. For students of Malay society and culture, this book is a must, for much of what is happening today has its roots in the period at the end of the nineteenth century.

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